

RECLAMATION AND THE CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS

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As dry winds and dust storms blew across the western High Plains in the early 1930's leaving devastated farmers in their wake, newly elected President Franklin Roosevelt was formulating sweeping plans in the nation's capital for emergency disaster relief. The entire country was in the grips of the Great Depression and jobless men everywhere struggled to earn enough money to buy food for their families. For the country's youth, the situation was equally desperate. Hundreds of thousands of young men from economically stricken households were unable to find work. Against this backdrop, Roosevelt outlined his concept for a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) during his inaugural address on March 4, 1933. He proposed creating a new program aimed at conserving the nation's depleted natural resources and putting unemployed youth to work. By the close of Roosevelt's first month in office, Congress had acted upon the President's recommendation and passed a law creating the CCC (initially called the ECW). Of all the New Deal programs instituted by Roosevelt to combat the economic hardships of the Great Depression, probably none proved as popular and successful as the CCC.

Roosevelt wasted no time in transposing his vision into action. In April 1933, he appointed Robert Fechner director of the CCC and established an Advisory Council comprised of representatives from the Departments of Labor, War, Interior and Agriculture. The purpose of the Council was to coordinate oversight of the program and create a forum for discussing policy issues. The Department of Labor was assigned responsibility for recruiting youths and the War Department (Army) was in charge of enrollee administration, transportation, housing, food, clothing, supplies, medical care, education, discipline, and physical conditioning. The Departments of Agriculture and Interior had the task of locating camps where there were needed conservation projects and of supervising the actual work.

Within a short time, CCC camps had been established across the country and young men were recruited to work on a myriad of conservation projects for various federal agencies. Less than three months after the program's inauguration, about 300,000 men were settled in almost 1,500 camps. According to Fechner, "it was the most rapid large scale mobilization of men the country had ever witnessed.

Initial enrollment in the CCC was limited to unemployed single men between the ages of 18 and 25 who were U.S. citizens. For the most part these were discouraged men, unsuccessful in securing jobs because they had no work experience. They were described as "a weaponless army whose recruits came from broken homes, highway trails and relief shelters. . ."¹ American Indians were at first not eligible but this restriction was soon lifted because of the dire conditions on many of the reservations.

¹Haskin, Frederic. "Praises Record of C.C.C. Camp" The Sunday Washington Star. August 11, 1940.

Enrollment was also expanded to include “local experienced men” and a limited number of World War I veterans. The latter were selected by the Veterans’ Administration and assigned to special camps operated less stringently than regular ones. Although racial discrimination was officially forbidden in accordance with the CCC legislation, blacks and other minorities did not escape prejudice within the program.² The number of blacks enrolled was limited and they were for the most part restricted to segregated camps.

The peak of CCC enrollment was reached in the summer of 1935 with 505,782 men scattered in 2,652 camps. The vast majority of enrollees (75%) worked on projects administered by the Department of Agriculture, and of these, more than half were employed in national, state, or private forests, under the direction of the United States Forest Service. The work of these camps can be divided into two broad categories: forest protection and forest improvement. Next to the Forest Service, the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) was the Department of Agriculture agency with the most camps under its direction. By 1938, the SCS had developed more than 500 project areas within 44 states. Their work focused on three main areas: the demonstration of practical methods of soil conservation to farmers, actual work upon private land in co-operation with landowners, and the development and improvement of erosion control techniques through research. Within the Department of Interior, the majority of camps were assigned to the National Park Service (NPS). Efforts concentrated on the improvement and protection of National Parks and resulted in many of the rustic structures that have come to epitomize the CCC.

The association between the CCC and the Bureau of Reclamation is far less well known. Even though the program was much smaller than within other agencies (in April 1937 Reclamation was assigned 34 camps which represented only 1.7 of the total number), the CCC made significant contributions to Reclamation and assisted in furthering the goals of the agency during the drought years of the Great Depression. It also afforded Reclamation the opportunity to expand on its primary mission of irrigation to develop recreational amenities at a number of its reservoirs.

The first CCC camp to open on a Reclamation project was established in May 1934 at Lake Guernsey, a reservoir of the North Platte Project, in Wyoming. Designated originally as RS-1 (Reclamation Service No. 1), the camp became known as BR-9. It was obtained under a cooperative agreement with the NPS and along with BR-10, established in July 1934, was responsible for transforming the reservoir shores into a showplace of recreational development. The outstanding significance of the contributions made by the CCC at Lake Guernsey resulted in the designation of Lake Guernsey State Park as a National Historic Landmark on September 25, 1997.

²Of three amendments to the bill signed by Roosevelt on March 31, 1933, one was submitted by Representative Oscar De Priest, Republican of Illinois, and the only Black Congressman. It prohibited discrimination on account of race, color, or creed. (Salmond, John. P. 23)

In early September 1934, a second camp was established on a cooperative basis with the NPS at Elephant Butte Reservoir on the Rio Grande Project in New Mexico. Designated BR-8, the camp enrollees, along with those from BR-54 occupied in August 1935, greatly improved the recreational facilities at the reservoir. They also transformed the landscape by building a variety of structures, terracing the hillsides, and planting hundreds of trees. The CCC component is a major feature of the Elephant Butte National Register Historic District, listed in the National Register in February 1997.

In July 1934, six drought-relief camps were also assigned to Reclamation. These were essentially the same as regular CCC camps but were restricted to states suffering severely under the drought and were authorized for one year, rather than the normal six months. Additionally, they were financed under different appropriations.³ Assigned numbers beginning with DBR (Drought Relief Bureau of Reclamation), the six camps were DBR-1 at Lake Minatare, Nebraska on the North Platte Project; DBR-2 at Fruitdale, South Dakota on the Belle Fourche Project; DBR-3 at Carlsbad, New Mexico on the Carlsbad Project; DBR-4 at Ysleta, Texas on the Rio Grande Project; DBR-5 at Heber, Utah on the Strawberry Valley Project; and DBR-6 at Ephraim, Utah on the Sanpete Project. The improvements completed on Reclamation irrigation projects by the drought-relief camps were of tremendous value in combating the acute water shortages plaguing farmers.

As Reclamation's CCC program expanded from its small beginnings in 1934, the types of project work undertaken by the enrollees grew more varied. Originally assigned to rehabilitate the storage, distribution and drainage systems of older projects that had been seriously affected by the combination of drought and depressed farm prices, camp activities broadened to include developing supplemental water supplies and constructing new irrigation projects. Much of the work accomplished was of a seemingly mundane and unspectacular nature but it had far-reaching benefits.

The rehabilitation of older project facilities consisted of returning weed- and silt-filled canals and laterals to a proper cross section; replacing decaying wood structures with concrete; adding new water control structures; building bridges over canals; eradicating weeds and rodents; reconditioning operating roads; placing riprap on canal and lateral banks, and sealing porous canal with earth or concrete linings.

The acute water deficiencies experienced during the Depression indicated that a few of the project storage facilities, though adequate under ordinary conditions, were insufficient during drought periods. To remedy this situation, CCC forces were used to build supplemental storage facilities. Examples are Midview Dam and dike on the Moon Lake Project in Utah (BR-11) and Anita Dam on the Huntley Project in Montana (BR-57).

³ "Civilian Conservation Corps Work on Reclamation Projects." by Dr. H.T. Cory. Reclamation Era. January 1936, p.22.

Another type of work undertaken by the CCC was flood control. Many areas of the West under Reclamation projects were subject to intense localized rainfalls of short duration that had caused severe damage to irrigation systems. The CCC built a number of flood control structures such as Apache and Box Canyon Dams on the Rio Grande Project (BR-39).

Auxiliary to these main classes of work, the CCC also engaged in improvements to wildlife refuges at reservoirs, rodent control operations, weed eradication experiments and emergency work. In cooperation with the Bureau of Biological Survey (now the Fish and Wildlife Service), Reclamation's CCC enrollees developed wildlife refuges at the Deer Flat Reservoir in western Idaho (BR-24), Tulelake Wildlife Refuge in northern California (BR-20), at Lake Walcott, in southern Idaho (BR-27), and at the Pishkun Reservoir in Montana (BR-33). At Elephant Butte Reservoir, CCC forces constructed a 14-pond fish hatchery (BR-8 and 54).

Although Reclamation's CCC program was not without its critics, overall it appears to have been viewed as very beneficial by the public. Annual open houses at the camps gave outsiders a perfect opportunity to learn of the accomplishments of the enrollees and to better understand the program. Camps participated in numerous local events such as parades and county fairs. Reclamation even produced a film in 1937 entitled "Reclamation and the CCC" which showed enrollees engaged at work on a number of projects. Unfortunately, no copy of the film has been located.

When CCC camps were assigned to Reclamation, the agency assumed responsibility for supervising and training the enrollees while they were engaged in project work. The latter was scheduled for five days a week, eight hours a day except in the event of emergencies. Enrollees gained valuable training in operating all types of equipment such as tractors, trucks, or draglines. They also became skilled mechanics, carpenters, masons, lumbermen, and surveyors. In addition to on-the-job training, enrollees had the opportunity to attend classes in the evening. Upon leaving Reclamation CCC camps, the young men had greatly improved their chances of finding a wide range of jobs .

The outbreak of World War II brought an end to the CCC. As the United States geared up the production of arms and ammunition, the unemployment problem dissolved. With the attack on Pearl Harbor, the country's attention was riveted on a new front. During the last full federal fiscal year of the CCC program, 1942, there was a reduction in the number of camps assigned to Reclamation from 43 to 7. With Congress's decision on June 30, 1942 to liquidate the entire program, all of Reclamation's remaining camps shut down the following month. During the life of the program, camps were operated at 83 separate locations on 45 Reclamation projects in 15 western states.

The contributions of the CCC were summarized in Reclamation's final report on the program , "The fine work of the Civilian Conservation Corps by 1942 had brought the Federal irrigation projects back to a high standard of physical excellence. The irrigation systems are now in generally good condition, able to deliver required amounts

of water and by the permanency of their rehabilitation they are insured against interruptions of consequence. “⁴ For the enrollees at Reclamation camps, the experience provided invaluable skills, training, and opened new doors for a more promising future. The CCC offered an opportunity “To learn in the great outdoors--how to work, how to live, and how to get ahead”⁵

The above information has been abstracted from a report entitled “The Bureau of Reclamation and the Civilian Conservation Corps” which includes an overview of Reclamation’s CCC program as well as information on individual camps assigned to the agency. For further information or to request a copy of the report, please contact Chris Pfaff at 303-445-2712.

⁴ “Final Report, Civilian Conservation Corps Activities, Bureau of Reclamation.”

⁵ Article from Congressional Record. February 2, 1939, National Archives, Denver (RG 115, Entry 28, Box 1)